

# Diversity Needed To Achieve Liberty, Justice For All

"I pledge allegiance ... with liberty and justice for all."

— Francis Bellamy (1892)

To be perfectly candid with you at the outset, when I began this *President's Perspective*, I did not know that Francis Bellamy wrote the Pledge of Allegiance that all of us learned in grammar school and which has only been amended once, when the phrase "one nation, under God" was added in the 1950s.

No, I looked that up.

For some time, I have been intrigued by the motto and logo that our Bar Association adopted a couple of years ago: "Seeking Liberty & Justice." The phrase had a certain familiarity to it so I did some research. That's how I learned about Mr. Bellamy.

With the recognition that etiology of our motto has historical roots, and as we enter the 21st Century, it would appear that a legitimate question for the NCBA is: "What is the North Carolina Bar Association doing to seek liberty and justice? And, for whom?"

Mr. Bellamy wrote, and we regularly say as citizens of this country, that it is "for all." As attorneys practicing law here in North Carolina in the year 2000 and as members of this association, what are we doing to ensure that it lives up to its promise and that it is "for all?"

Few issues facing the American public are as vexing or as important as those involving diversity. Our profession and this association are no less affected by these issues than any other segment of American life, but we may have a greater responsibility to deal with them.

It may well be that the measure of determining whether the NCBA is truly "Seeking Liberty & Justice" will be how we responsibly and effectively respond to issues of diversity.

It is not a news flash to anyone that the practice of law has historically been the domain of white males. When I graduated from law school 34 years ago here in North Carolina, there were two women

## President's Perspective

By Jim Maxwell



and one African-American in my class.

Today, ABA statistics show that nearly 30 percent of the practicing lawyers in this country are women, with nearly 50 percent of the current enrollment in all law schools being women. Whether women are being welcomed and appropriately assimilated into all aspects of the profession or our association may be debatable. At least they are entering the profession and participating in the process.

The same is not true for non-whites. Despite the fact that more than 32 percent

of the American population is now non-white, less than 8 percent of the bar is.

Are these statistics really important to our profession or to this association? If the NCBA is fiscally sound today and is generally serving its members

well through its sections and their continuing legal education programs, why is diversity a major issue facing us other than the fact that it is obviously a "politically correct" topic? And, what does it have to do with "Seeking Liberty & Justice?"

Being a white male, it may be presumptuous for me to suggest an answer to those questions. However, as president, I believe that the survival of this association as an effective representative of, and advocate for, our profession may hinge, in part, on how we address the issue of diversity.

In order for our profession to be relevant to the needs of the public we seek to serve, we need to reflect its make-up, as well as understand and embrace its diversity. For the North

Carolina Bar Association to meet the challenge of our motto, this means, in part, that we must welcome and equitably assimilate women into all phases of our work, seek to encourage and expand on the role of minorities in the practice of law and in the NCBA and utilize and benefit from their enormous talents and enthusiasm.

If attorneys and this association are not leaders in embracing and demonstrating the benefits of diversity, then we certainly fail in carrying out the mission contained in our motto. I suggest that we are taking steps, sometimes small and occasionally in the wrong direction, but steps nonetheless, in attempting to deal with all of these areas of diversity.

The September issue of the *ABA Journal* focuses on the topic of women and the law today. It is both instructive and disappointing in demonstrating how far we have to go.

The association is making some progress, at least in the area of leadership. For the first time, 25 percent of our board, and the chairs and vice chairs of our sections are women, as are 35 percent of the members of the newly established Long-Range Planning Committee.

Percentages do not demonstrate fairness or equality. Instead, these initial efforts represent one of the small steps in the right direction. The Task Force on Women in the Profession is beginning its second year of work in identifying how the association can best serve our women members. We eagerly await their report.

On ethnic issues, both our Hispanic/Latino and Minorities in the Profession committees are active and committed to embracing diversity and helping us identify different and better methods to achieve this.

The Bar Association, in partnership with BarBari, offered one scholarship for a minority student in each law school in the state this past summer for the bar review course. This year, the MIP Committee will be seeking funds to help underwrite the expense of hiring minority students for firms that would not normally be able to afford hiring summer clerks.

In addition, it is attempting to encourage non-whites to enter the profession by conducting seminars for high school students around the state specifically aimed at attracting them to consider law as a career.

Our Race Relations Symposium last spring was, at times, painful, but hopefully encouraged an ongoing dialogue on the issues of race as they affect our profession. More small steps. Again, hopefully in the right direction.

The primary benefit of inclusion to our association is that by seeking diverse ideas from different perspectives we will be able to expand our own vision and knowledge of what is important to all of our members and we become more relevant to them. As we become more relevant in representing, speaking for and working with our diverse membership, we become more effective in seeking both liberty and justice "for all" in our society through our association.

Some of you know that I have coached the Jordan High School Swim Team for many years. I enjoy working with young people. The medium I have chosen is swimming. It is a diverse group by gender, nationality, economic background and, at times, race.

In order to help focus their attention on the need for teamwork, we have often worn t-shirts which proclaim: Together Everyone Achieves More. We have been successful in achieving our goals.

If this works well for a hormonally active group of teenagers in a competitive environment, it should be no less true for our profession. Simplistic? Idealistic? Naive? Maybe. Necessary? Absolutely. For only together, all of us — by race, gender and age — can the NCBA ever hope to truly achieve its goal of "Seeking Liberty & Justice." ■

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## Hall Of Fame Applications Accepted

The General Practice Section is accepting applications for the 2001 General Practice Hall of Fame from attorneys who want to nominate a member of the North Carolina Bar Association.

The selection committee recognizes outstanding members of the legal profession whose careers have served as models for lawyers in the general practice of law.

To be eligible for nomination, lawyers must have practiced for at least 25 years and still be living. The Hall of Fame, established in 1989, has 62 honor-

ees who exhibit the highest standards of ethics and professional competency. They have rendered a high level of service to the Bar and to their communities through their practice.

The application and up to five letters of support are due by Feb. 5, 2001. You can find a copy of the application in the General Practice Section's newsletter or on the Bar Association's Web site at [www.ncbar.org](http://www.ncbar.org). To have one mailed to you, please call Jane Weathers at the N.C. Bar Center at 1-800-662-7407 or (919) 677-0561. ■



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